

SEC. 316. (a) In addition to other purposes for which funds in the Iraq Freedom Fund are available, such funds shall also be available for reimbursing a member of the Armed Forces for the cost of air fare incurred by the member for any travel by the member within the United States that is commenced during fiscal year 2003 or fiscal year 2004 and is completed during either such fiscal year while the member is on rest and recuperation leave from deployment overseas in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, but only for one round trip by air between two locations within the United States.

(b) It is the sense of Congress that the commercial airline industry should, to the maximum extent practicable, charge members of the Armed Forces on rest and recuperation leave as described in subsection (a) and their families specially discounted, lowest available fares for air travel in connection with such leave and that any restrictions and limitations imposed by the airlines in connection with the air fares charged for such travel should be minimal.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, will the Senator withhold for a minute?

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that Senator LEAHY be recognized following the disposition of the Coleman amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that Senator BYRD be added as a cosponsor to Senator COLEMAN's amendment.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. COLEMAN. Mr. President, the Pentagon has rolled out a program to bring home troops who have served in Iraq for over a year. It is a good program. Under the Rest and Recuperation Leave Program, these service men and women will get a much deserved 2 weeks of R&R with their families. Unfortunately, the program only provides for transportation to places such as Baltimore, Atlanta, Dallas, or Los Angeles. From these cities, our service men and women are expected to pay their own way home at same-day rates.

Chad Krandall and Dave Schmaltz, cousins and Minnesota National Guard members from Gwinner, MN were told the price of a same-day ticket from Baltimore to Minneapolis-St. Paul would be \$1,200 each. Steven Bazaard, another Guard member from Minnesota, was faced with a similarly high bill if he was to make it all the way home to see his wife Sherry Billups in Blackduck, MN. Isaac Girling, a member of the 142nd Battalion in Iraq, will have to pay the same exorbitant fee when he comes home next week to Stillwater, MN to see his newborn son for the first time.

I don't have anything against Baltimore, Atlanta, Dallas, or Los Angeles. But to be perfectly frank, these cities can't really hold a candle to Blackduck or Gwinner, and they are a long way away and expensive to travel to.

This R&R program is a good start, but it doesn't go far enough to support our troops. These are families which

have already made do for a year without their loved ones, and the toll has been both emotional and financial. To ask them to pay same-day airfare to see their loved ones is simply unfair.

If we acknowledge that troops who have been in Iraq for a year deserve a 2-week vacation like anyone else, we ought to make sure they get all the way home. That is what we are talking about here—making sure our service men and women who have performed so admirably, have sacrificed so much in defense of their country and in defense of freedom, get all the way home.

I have introduced, along with the distinguished chairman, Senator STEVENS, and my friend and fellow Senator from Minnesota, Senator DAYTON, an amendment to fix this unintended consequence of the R&R program. We have broad bipartisan support, including Senators BYRD, DAYTON, ALEXANDER, CHAMBLISS, COLLINS, CONRAD, CORZINE, CRAIG, DEWINE, DOMENICI, DORGAN, ENSIGN, ENZI, GRAHAM of South Carolina, GREGG, JOHNSON, KENNEDY, MURKOWSKI, SANTORUM, SUNUNU, STEVENS, and ALLEN.

The chairman and his staff on the Appropriations Committee have been very gracious in working with me to craft a good amendment to make sure our troops and their families do not have to pay these high rates.

This amendment will not have any budgetary consequence. It will simply make sure existing funds are used for this essential program to boost troop morale and to reunite families separated by this engagement. This amendment is the right thing to do.

I notice my friend and colleague, the senior Senator from Minnesota, Senator DAYTON is here. I yield the floor at this time to Senator DAYTON.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. DAYTON. Mr. President, I thank my distinguished colleague, Senator COLEMAN, who joined with great minds which think in the same direction. We introduced this legislation on the same day. I am proud to be joining with Senator COLEMAN in the Coleman-Dayton amendment to provide for transportation to homes and places of origin for our troops, many of whom, in the case of Minnesota, have just had their tours of duty in the Iraqi theater extended by 6 months. In the case of the 142nd Battalion, it covers northwestern Minnesota and North Dakota. As a result of this extension and this deployment and administrative matters, many of them will not see their families for up to 18 months. To drop them off at the Baltimore airport and tell them they are going to be on their own at that point and at their own expense to try to get back and see their families for their one opportunity in nearly 18 months I think would be shameful. I think the American people are more generous than this. I think under these circumstances it is the least we can do.

I thank the Senator from Minnesota for his leadership on this matter, and I am glad to sponsor it with him.

I yield the floor.

Mr. COLEMAN. Mr. President, I say to my friend and colleague, Senator DAYTON, that the two folks from Minnesota understand it is really good to get home—and also the folks from Alaska and Idaho. This amendment does that.

I urge adoption of the amendment. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I want to commend both Senators from Minnesota for sponsoring this amendment. If they have no objection, I ask unanimous consent to be added as a cosponsor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I express my support for this amendment—which is very similar to an amendment I had filed earlier—to pay for the travel home of U.S. troops currently serving in the Iraqi theater of operations. I am pleased to join in cosponsoring the amendment.

The Department of Defense recently announced that it would grant soldiers on 12-month deployments as a part of Operation Iraqi Freedom 15 days of rest and recuperation leave. About 270 soldiers a day are now arriving in the United States to begin their leave period. At the present time, these troops are required to pay their own way home from their port of debarkation—right now, Baltimore-Washington International Airport. It says something about the priorities of the Department of Defense that while they are asking Congress for another \$87 billion for war and reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, they are also making soldiers on leave pay for their transportation home and back.

Many of these soldiers are members of the Reserves and National Guard. Many of those citizen soldiers have recently learned that, because the administration has been unable to mobilize sufficient international support to ease the burden on American troops, they will be required to spend a full 12 months in Iraq. This is in addition to the 2 to 3 months they spent away from home training for their mission. Despite the shifting dates for their return home, our American service men and women have served with courage and distinction in terrible conditions.

Soldiers from the 142d Combat Engineering Battalion, a North Dakota National Guard unit, have already begun coming home on leave. The first soldiers chosen for leave were very concerned that they might have to pay well over \$1,000 to buy a ticket home from Baltimore. I was very pleased that Northwest Airlines, the main provider of air travel to North Dakota, was able to respond to my request to offer reasonable priced tickets to these brave soldiers.

But this should be only a temporary measure. I urge the Senate to now clear the way for full government funding of the travel expenses for our